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BIOGRAPHY

WILLIAM HENRY CARMALT

SAMUEL C. HARVEY, M.D., F.A.C.S., New Haven, Connecticut

Reprint from

SURGERY, GYNECOLOGY AND OBSTETRICS

February, 1932, Vol. LIV, 254-255

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ON July 17, 1929, William H. Carmalt died, a few weeks short of the age of 94 years. He was born of Quaker parentage in Friendsville, Pennsylvania, on August 3, 1836, and his lifetime spanned the introduction of anæsthesia, the orientation of surgery around pathology, the discovery of antisepsis, the development of asepsis, the growth of the entire field of modern surgery, and the establishment of medical teaching under university auspices.

Brought up on a farm he pursued his elementary education at boarding schools and did not fix upon medicine as his profession until he was 21 years of age. He then studied for 2 years with the Doctors Wyman at Cambridge, transferring at the end to the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City from which he graduated with the class of 1861. It was at this time that he came under the inspiration and guidance of Dr. John C. Dalton, the eminent professor of physiology there, an association that undoubtedly influenced greatly his subsequent career. This period of training was completed by an interneship at St. Luke's Hospital, following which he engaged in general practice in New York City until 1869, serving for a time with the Union forces in the Civil War.

His bent was very definitely toward ophthalmology, and during the latter portion of this period he was surgeon to the New York Eye Dispensary and ophthalmic surgeon to the Charity Hospital on Blackwell's Island. In 1864 he became a charter member of both the New York and the American Ophthalmological Societies. That this early specialization did not narrow his field of vision is shown by his subsequent career; in fact at the same period, he was acting as a Commissioner of the New York State Agricultural Society and studying infectious abortion in cows, concerning which he drew up an authoritative report.

Not content with these auspicious beginnings and searching for a more thorough preparation for his undertaking of medicine, he gave over his practice in 1870 and went to Germany where he studied for some 4 years under Stricker and Waldeyer going with the latter to Strasbourg at close of the Franco-Prussian War. He acquired a thorough understanding of pathology and a knowledge of the Germanic medical literature which served as a background for his teaching and practice.

In 1876 he opened an office in New Haven, again as an ophthalmologist and 3 years later was made professor of ophthalmology and otology in the Yale Medical School. In 1881 the chair of surgery having become vacant, he was transferred from the special into the larger field which he was to adorn for over 25 years. Like Sands his advancing years found him constantly broadening his activities rather than undergoing the customary shrinkage of interests.

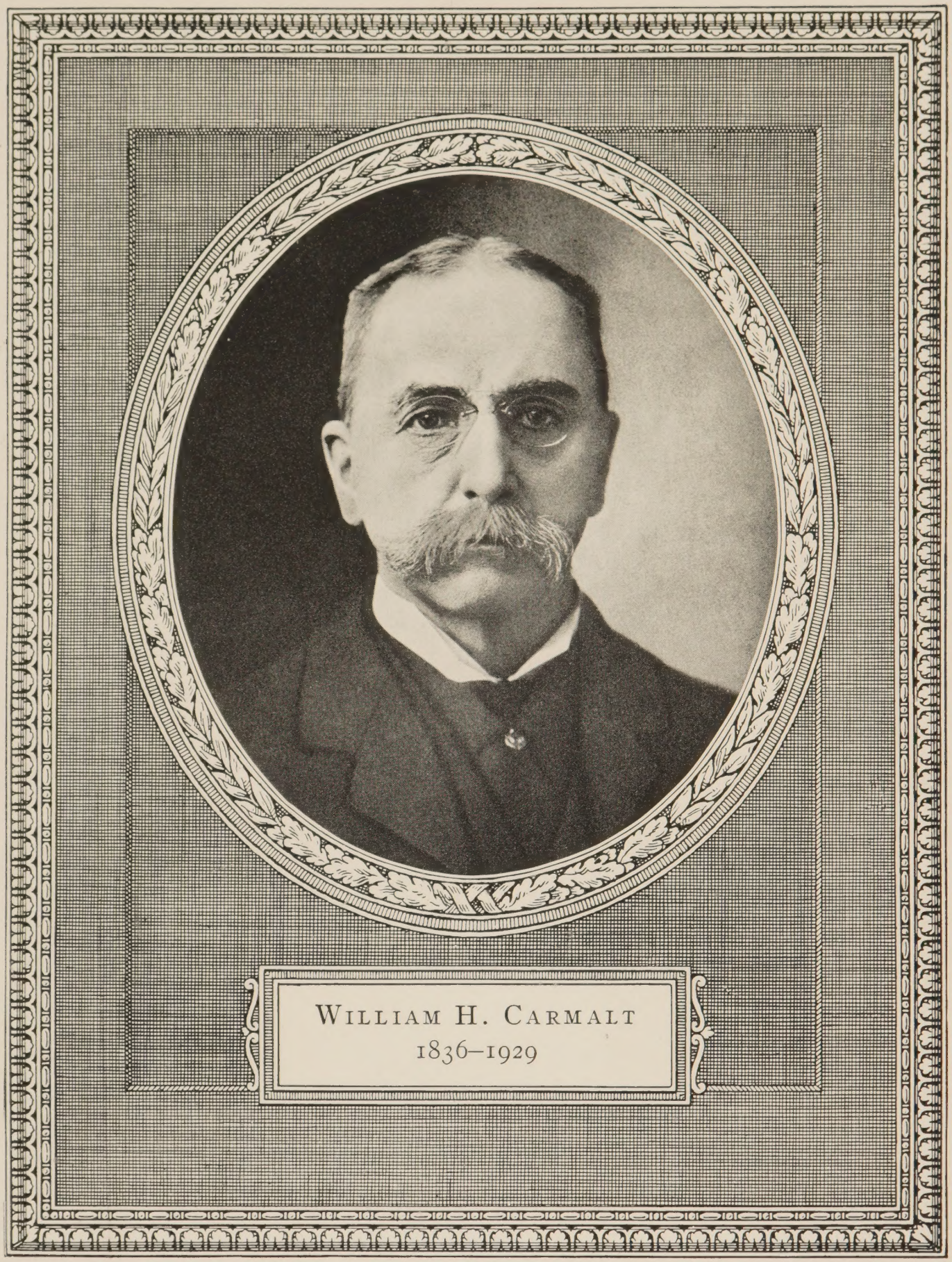
Shortly Dr. Carmalt began to publish case reports which today are of value as indicating how closely he trod upon the heels of every advance in his field. Operations under the carbolic spray, asepsis, intestinal anastomosis, appendicitis, the treatment of peritonitis, the use of the roentgen-ray, early interference in gall-bladder disease; one can follow the evolution of surgery as it is portrayed in these. More formal contributions were not lacking however, the most characteristic of these being upon controversial subjects where the public and professional good required that some one of competence speak forth unreservedly. The case then was thoroughly prepared, the evidence assembled, the deductions clearly drawn, and the conclusions so stated that there could be no misunderstanding.

To his teaching he devoted much labor, not only in presenting his own experience but in assembling the literature pertinent to the question in hand. But of greater influence than his didactic presentation was the force of his personality as displayed in the handling of his patients. Honesty of thought, conscientious care, and intolerance of anything that smacked of cheap sentimentality or slipshodness held his students to a rigorous standard. Important as was this influence on the men coming in contact with him, much more so for his profession was his clear thinking and vision as regards medical education. From the first he foresaw and attempted to expedite the conjunction of the medical school and hospital as an educational enterprise, and although in his own consulship he was not to enjoy at first hand the consummation of his desires, he continued to support to the end of his activities the progressive plans of those coming after him.

The interest of Dr. Carmalt in his patients, in the students, and in the medical school by no means exhausted his sense of responsibility. The successive calls to positions of importance within the medical profession, the presidencies of the local city, county, and state medical societies, the last of which he was counselor for many years, the presidency of the American Surgical Association, the positions of responsibility in the Congress of American Physicians and Surgeons, ending in over 20 years of service as chairman of the executive committee; these with many more minor positions were regarded by him as not purely honorary but as carrying with them obligations which he met most conscientiously.

By these many contacts, he became known as a rugged, fearless character with standards of professional conduct not alone for others but for himself as well. Usually gruff but even brutal where occasion demanded it, he neither tolerated "bunk" nor compromised in matters of ethics, yet achieved not only the respect of his profession but the affection of those intimate with him. He exemplified in himself the best qualities of the surgeon who knows the obligations of his profession in the broadest sense and fulfills them.

"Integer vitae sclerisque purus . . ."



William H. Carmalt
1836–1929

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